

## John Butcher: inside the narrative

by Rhodri Davies

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When I was approached to write this article I worried over the risk of being too near the subject matter, having worked with Butcher in Chris Burn's *Ensemble*. But, since the personal factor is a vital part of music making, my hope is to shed light on Butcher's work that may not be obvious from the outside.

Butcher began playing saxophone while studying physics at university. Since completing his doctorate in the early 80s he has been principally dedicated to improvisation, performing with many seminal groups including Derek Bailey's *Company*, *Polwechsel* and The Phil Minton Quartet.

He also runs the highly regarded Acta label, which boasts discs of a consistently high quality. Among the catalogue is a gem of a recording - *A New Distance* by *The Spontaneous Music Ensemble*, which captures the group's last recorded concert. The late John Stevens loved Butcher's playing and invited him to join what became the final version of the SME in '92.



Butcher holds his time with Stevens in high esteem. He says, "John Stevens was a very strong character, an amazing proselytiser and arguer. With some people you know you're really playing for real. There's no casualness about it, it's a lifetime's activity. You don't just come out for the weekend to play a bit of music." Like Stevens, this seriousness of intent informs all of Butcher's performances, every concert pertaining a weighty importance.

The first time I saw him play was in a duo with the pianist Veryan Weston at Dolly Fosssets, Kentish Town in July 1996. The gig was set in a typical London free-

improvisation venue, a room above a pub. With the obligatory beaten up piano, the incessant noise of traffic, road diggers and downstairs jukebox. This gig had the added theatrics of an old woman appearing at the window of an adjacent flat, who

Conway Hall, London, 1994 by Z.V. Vasovic

shouted when the music got too loud. Despite all these distractions I was gripped by the duo's mercurial interaction and struck by Butcher's unique approach to his instrument, melody, control of multi-phonics and an intensity achieved by means other than powerhouse blowing.

I've chosen the recordings that I feel best represent his body of work. Focusing in particular on his solo work and three long-standing musical associations with Chris Burn, John Russell and Phil Durrant.



Victoria, Canada 1999 by Anthony Starck

## Solo

*London and Cologne* is a recording of mainly live solo playing and highlights how extraordinarily potent his performance can be. Butcher's technique shows an incredible control that never becomes staid and academic because he plays at the very edge of his control and knowledge. Within his approach lies the dichotomy of pushing the saxophone to its extreme whilst not denying the nature of the instrument. He concentrates on the inner nature of a sound, the conventional or unconventional ways it can be produced. All the saxophone's possibilities are explored, even those deemed unfashionable in some "new music" quarters, such as melody and expression.

Often dubbed 'Considered and cerebral' Butcher has conducted rigorous research into his playing which has put him in new areas, allowing him to escape from habit or cliché. A series of Arts Council bursaries has furthered his exploration into multi-phonics and multi-tracking. He would also practice playing like other instruments, copying brass musicians to get a very precise note articulation and thinking of his tone clusters in terms of string multiple stopping. He would play flute studies to take him beyond the top of his instrument and Bach cello and violin studies for difficult intervallic leaps.

Butcher's approach to soprano is very different to tenor. He mostly doesn't translate from one to the other, though there are times when he uses the same material on both. His soprano has a purer approach to melodic shape, as heard on *Some Kind of Memory*, whereas his tenor is much more timbral and polyphonic, as on *Schism*.

*Thirteen Friendly Numbers* remains his best solo statement of his two releases and is wonderfully recorded by Steve Lowe at Gateway Studios, Kingston. Anyone engaging with improvisation seriously has to deal with Evan Parker and Derek Bailey's innovations. Butcher is no exception. Parker's playing showed him how acoustic instruments could be radically bent to an individual musician's will. *Buccinator's Outing* shows an amazing control of cyclic breathing producing harsh multi-phonics charged with tension and bursting for release. Bailey's use of pitch/tone relationships

influenced Butcher's approach towards melody. *Notelet* for soprano exemplifies his ongoing concern to play a melodic line that doesn't evoke obvious idioms. It is an impossible task to avoid associations with atonal melody, but the process invariably throws up something unique. He alternates more than one idea and develops them by weaving infinite variations. This is melody informed by having journeyed through extreme experimentation and pushing sounds to the edge. Another melodic concern can be heard on *The Brittle Chance*. Butcher plays expansions and contractions towards notes through a sequence of multi-phonics and different articulations, adding and taking away extra notes of microtones. *Wisp & Whisk* has simply a beautiful serenity rare in the tenor lineage.

## Chris Burn

Chris Burn's *Ensemble* and the recording *Navigations* provides a conducive context for Butcher's saxophone. It is a large group very much concerned with playing 'orchestrally' where each voice adds to the whole without losing individuality. Of that experience Butcher says, "If you try to remove from improvisation what it means to be an individual voice, you are taking away almost its defining quality, what makes it special and different from other music".

His involvement with Burn goes back to the 70's when they met at university and then rehearsed and put on concerts at the Workers Music Association, All Saints Rd, for a number of years. Both were attempting to move away from the history of their instruments by rejecting as much as they could of conventional playing techniques. They started by playing Free Jazz with the transition to free-improvisation following quickly. Burn extends the piano as a percussive instrument in the lineage of Bartok, Cowell and Cage, surrounding himself with an incredible array of percussion. The piano itself becomes one of many percussive instruments.



London 1980s by Avril Levi.

*Fonetiks* was their first recording in '84 and is still available on vinyl. Maybe owing to their background in Jazz and Classical music they received a lukewarm reception and experienced difficulties being accepted by the improvisation scene. Listening back this is difficult to believe. This recording reveals how, even then, they escaped from the baggage that weighed each instrument down. Burn says, "Maybe it was perceived as being too clean and imitative of Classical music - which it wasn't.

Neither of us tried to imitate Classical music in our lives". *Inside the Narrative* best

reflects the way they were to eventually move forward. The music is as free of association as possible. It engages in a polemic that exposes the raw materials of sound and structure. It goes deeper than simply a search for new sounds, but finds new ways of interacting and being. The musical argument and structure never exist separately from the acoustic material. The music has a flowing narrative and still relies on close interaction and propulsive energy but differs from Free Jazz in that it sets up sonic areas only to quickly move to other equally interesting areas. The thinking behind the sounds may be cerebral, but the actual sonic material is rich with a wide range of instrumental colour.

Overall, *Fonetiks* documents the seeds of Butcher's development, especially his work with melodies and multi-phonics, rhythmic interplay and motif. Generally his playing is less controlled than later as he allows more room for the chance sounds that are thrown up by his reed. However there are still passages of sublime playing, specifically a section of long held notes on *Inside the Narrative*.

### **Phil Durrant / John Russell**

This trio is Butcher's longest standing group. Durrant and Butcher met at Phil Wachsmann's workshops and Durrant invited him to play with Russell in '83. Concert moves is the trio's definitive recorded statement, documenting two obviously highly charged live gigs. The CD bursts with intensity, all three musicians completely on top of their material. Throughout, the music never rests, producing a fast flow of consciousness. This is music that deals with the building blocks of sound.



Nickelsdorf 1996 by Hatald Mannsberger

The music is like looking at cells dividing under the microscope, very small incidents with a lot of detail that add up to a whole, a quality of English improvisation that goes back to *The Music Improvisation Company*. There is a logical way that every idea leads into another. What happens next only happens because of what happened

before it. Different layers of the music react to each other, and are often transformations of each other. All three musicians change direction, without obviously changing what they're doing.

Durrant's music is gritty yet delicate, you can feel the weight of bow on strings. He isolates sounds so as to experience their weight, shape, colour and density conveyed

through a consummate use of silence and precise entrance of tone. Russell provides an exploration of subtlety, pitch and texture delivered at lightning speed. Mainly through attack and harmonics his playing has a clear character. This is sound produced by the pressure and friction of one surface against the other and the time it takes to decay. Butcher alters the role traditionally limited to the saxophone by eschewing solo statements and working at the dynamic of strings. The sax plays with a transparency that never swamps the strings. This equality is best typified by *The Spread*, which he never dominates. However, this is not to say he's just providing wallpaper music; his contribution at the beginning of *Trompe-l'oreille* is intensely charged. Butcher's lyricism is sometimes over-looked yet he often gravitates to a motif, a kind of signature mark that can be heard throughout most of his recorded work and here on *Playfair's Axiom* and *Glen Called*.

### Electronics and multi-tracks

One issue Butcher's music raises, is what function does the struggle to produce new sounds on acoustic instruments play in an age of electronically produced music? He responds, "There's something about the uniformity, the way everything is from a similar physical origin and is identifiably a saxophone that gives the music a coherence and strength. The act of restricting it gives it depth. With electronics there isn't the physical element of difficulty in producing sounds. Things get very smoothed out. I miss that edge in pure electronics". However, on *Secret Measures* Butcher does engage with Phil Durrant's live electronics. "What interests me in interacting with electronics is working with another musical intelligence that controls the electronics. I've got to make decisions according to their agenda in music which brings the energy of improvisation back into it."



Dodorama, Rotterdam 1999.

The music on *Secret Measures* is relentless and uncompromising throughout. Durrant leaves his violin at home and generates purely electronic sonorities. Butcher plays a sound and Durrant instantly reacts, manipulating and returning it; in turn Butcher reacts and the

loop continues. The result is nothing like conventional electro-acoustic music. Neither

is it like the typical fare of call and response with obligatory delay and reverb, the connexions go much deeper. Butcher is a perfect foil for Durrant's electronic sounds. *Secret Measures* is uniquely fresh, owing mainly to it being sampler free, and conceived in real time at a gig in Switzerland. It's also the first time they tried this set-up and their language as a result is new and unfixed. *A Tilbury* is a monumental maelstrom of elemental collisions of material and inter-cutting of timbral blocks.

Butcher himself has long had an interest in electronics, involving numerous early experiments with close miking, feedback effects and multi-tracking. In fact many aspects of his early playing were influenced by electronic composition of the 50s and 60s. Leading to the juxtaposition of different timbral areas, the moulding of blocks of sound, the escaping from the saxophone's linearity and the discovering of more complex sound areas.

His first recorded outing for amplified soprano is *Acute* on *Fonetiks* where he uses live amplification to gain access to the saxophone's internal sounds such as air and pad noise. *Mackle Music* on *Thirteen Friendly Numbers* focuses on the rhythmic possibilities of close-miked pad noise. *Bells and Clappers* on the same album produces a xenochronicity by positing similar materials from a limited sound field against each other. *Shrinkdown* on London and Cologne is a more thorough exploration of the same technique, but mixing different sound areas.

His recent composition, *Floater*, with an electronic structure, generated by a Korg MS20 synthesiser, for the Austrian group *Polwechsel*, appears on *Polwechsel 3*.